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Mechanism, process and the wider context of economic geography

Commentary on 'Rethinking Mechanism and Process in the Geographical Analysis of Uneven Development' by Henry Wai-chung Yeung

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Abstract

This commentary responds to Henry Wai-chung Yeung's call to develop clearer causal explanations in geography through mechanism-based thinking. His suggested use of a critical realist framework to ground geographical research on economies is, on one level, appealing and may help to counteract taken-for-granted assumptions about socio-spatial conditions and the significance of economic structures for everyday lived experiences. However, the general lack of applied critical realist research means the distinction between "mechanism" and "process" is often difficult to define in analyses of specific empirical events or geographical episodes. Not only is there a need for methodological development but, I suggest, also for greater recognition of critical realism as a reflective practice. We need to consider the means by which scholars distinguish between contingent and necessary relations, identify structures and counterfactuals, and infer how mechanisms work out in particular places. The critical realist goal of advancing transformative change through the provision of causal explanation relies upon inferences made on the basis of researcher experience. Hence, we need to recognise that research is always a political practice and be careful not to discount knowledge borne from other analytical approaches.

Keywords: critical realism; explanation; geographical analysis; mechanism; process.

Mechanism, process and the wider context of economic geography

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in defining economic geography's core intellectual project and contribution to the social sciences. Mainly in response to the Economic Geography Research Group of the RGS-IGB report tracking the movement of Economic Geographers into Business and Management Schools in the UK (see James et al., 2018), geographers undertaking research on economies have reflected on the framing of the subdiscipline and its theoretical and methodological practices (*Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 2018: 1496-1545; also Gibson, 2019). In turn, Henry Wai-chung Yeung's (2019) article speaks to economic and political geographers and argues for a (re)turn to the 'intense theorization of causality and mechanisms in critical realism' as a means of 'advancing the explanatory goals of geographical analysis' (p?) which he suggests have been weakened by 'thick description of socio-spatial processes' (p?). It then claims, in ambitious terms, the applicability of a critical realist approach to geographical scholarship more generally.

Yeung's contention is that geographical comprehension of 'patterns of uneven development both within and across countries that are critical to understanding contemporary economic and political debates' (p?) are limited by an ongoing failure to differentiate between "process" and "mechanism" in causal explanations. Process, he suggests, should reference changes that proceed through contingent events, while mechanism should denote the components that generate those events (the constituent parts of process). The explanatory nature of geography must avoid the conflation of mechanism and process as this reduces its radical edge. A critical realist method, his article suggests, helps facilitate an analysis of complex and contradictory phenomena. It does not simply posit that A causes B but develops a critique of socio-spatial change and related lived experiences that helps point to the most decisive areas of conflict and spheres of action (see also Joseph, 1998). Hence, its radicality lies in it focusing on mechanisms and processes and not subscribing to universal or trans-historical abstractions. Yeung illustrates his argument with reference to ideas of neoliberalism, developing and extending the critiques, not just of neoliberalism, but other process-based analyses that are seen to mitigate effective political engagement (cf. Ferguson, 2010; Weller and O'Neill, 2014; Venugopal, 2015).

Yeung indicates that there are geographical studies where spatial relationships and practices are claimed on the basis of insufficient data, but his argument concerns more than the overinterpretation of empirical research findings. It is a call for more tightly defined theories of neoliberalism, path dependence and analogous geographical processes. In short, it asks how we as geographers can produce more than just stylised facts. How can we bring new knowledge that is

appreciative of the human and physical characteristics of places and environments and ensure that this knowledge is not applied insensitively to context? Moreover, how can we guard against the use of “chaotic” or “fuzzy” concepts that obscure ‘the possibility of and responsibility for socio-spatial change’ (p. ?) by simplifying phenomena in such a way that the capacity of individuals to constrain or enable the component mechanisms of a process in action is no longer evident (see also Markusen, 1999)?

Critical realism – given its appreciation of enduring structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena (Bhaskar, 2008) – is proposed as a means by which geographers can uncover the features of contexts that set different mechanisms in motion so as to produce particular outcomes. I do not disagree with the expressed need to counter universalising rhetoric, which has led some scholars to question the reality of concepts like neoliberalism, nor the utility of a framework that focuses attention upon the complex interplay of context and mechanisms. But I note that the heterogeneity and complexity of the social world requires a degree of synthesis to pull together knowledge about spatial patterns and relationships, and caution that we ought not forget the importance of positionality for interpreting the shifting nature of economic and political world (see also MacLeavy, 2014). Not only is research a social process whereby geographers – sometimes unknowingly – respond to experience, but any attempt to bring cause back into geographical analysis via critical realism implies that objectivity is possible thereby undermining at least implicitly work on the social, cultural, racialised and gendered dimensions aspects of economic and political issues (see also Cockayne et al, 2018).

In what follows I focus on what is claimed to permit deeper levels of explanation in geography, namely the separation of mechanism from process. I consider the extent to which the critical realist framework to establish causation can help us to identify what is specific and what is general in theorisations of neoliberalism, drawing upon recent co-authored work on Brexit to illustrate the difficulty in mobilising this framework in “open” environments where there is capacity for change (Sayer, 1992). At its root, the problem is that ‘mechanisms are not regularities but are potentially causal generative processes that operate in particular historical, local, or institutional contexts’ (Jones, 2010: 203). Demarcating one from the other therefore raises questions around the duration and geographical scope of study; that is, how to create the conditions of a “closed” system in an empirical research enquiry. To elucidate explanatory mechanisms and structures, a critical realist analysis needs to ensure there is no change in the intrinsic enabling conditions and also that the relationship between the causal mechanism and the external world remains constant (confirming the regularity of what Bhaskar (2008) terms the

extrinsic condition). Given the dynamism of the social world, we need to be realistic about what can be achieved in this respect.

Let me illustrate this assessment with reference to a recent article on the UK referendum on EU membership in which my co-authors and I engaged with the way in which ‘electoral *processes* produce division’ (Bromley-Davenport et al, 2019: 808; emphasis added). In this, we sought to identify and make sense of the uneven geographies of leave and remain voting using qualitative data detailing the different ways in which people had given meaning to their votes at a time when the terms of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU were unknown. We were concerned that the presumption of two diametrically opposed groups in British politics (leavers and remainers) was obscuring the messy and contradictory ways in which votes were cast. Moreover, the caricatured view of the electorate was militating against the establishment of a political movement that not only identified a level of dissatisfaction with the political status quo but recognised and sought to respond to it. Our process-based conception of referendum identified the complexity of voting patterns and behaviours. Yet a critical realist scholar such as Yeung might contend that the concrete mechanisms constitutive of the process through which members of the public aligned themselves with those either for or against EU membership were underspecified. The causal claims to which we alluded (with regards to the role of economic stagnation, marginalisation and mistrust in engendering support for the Leave campaign) did not make explicit how disaffection with politics is operationalised through specific mechanisms that connect macro-level changes (e.g. deindustrialisation, the demise of the unions, the emergence of the professional politician) with particular sets of outcomes in UK economy and society (e.g. left behind places, disenfranchised groups).

Revisiting our research in light of Yeung’s critique, it seems necessary to bring questions of causality to the fore. So, what are the explanatory *determinants* and *forces* of difference and division in the UK referendum on EU membership? Can an extended period of economic and political change serve as the cause of the pattern of votes that was observed, or is it necessary to distil this rather general idea down to a series of antecedent events or necessary conditions? The critical realist framework suggests that we can distinguish causal factors through intensive research, but whether the Brexit vote should be conceived as a mechanism for socio-spatial change (something that occurs as a result of voters being presented with a ballot paper) or a process (in which the choice to vote leave or remain is contingent upon the sequential series of events and actions by individuals and broader collectives in and beyond the UK) is dependent upon the conditions we use to establish a closed system; that is, what temporal and spatial parameters we use to determine our theoretical formulations. Yeung’s article recognises this. As he states, ‘a mechanism can be a

particular kind of process' (p.?) such that it appears not so much the definition of a mechanism vis-a-vis a process that is important, but the type and style of theorising that a turn to mechanism-based thinking encourages (see also Hedström and Swedberg, 1996).

With mechanism and process so heavily intertwined, the blueprint for 'revitalising explanation as a central purpose of geographical analysis' (p?) requires theoretically self-conscious and reflective empirical practice. I commend Yeung's attempt to effectively mobilise this conceptual apparatus but also wonder about the extent to which scholars can or need to bring out singular mechanisms. Though Yeung's article provides a worked example of how the mechanism/process distinction might work in the investigation of neoliberalism in China, his suggestion that the Communist Party serves as the causal mechanism of economic transformation in the country is curious. An alternative reading might suggest that party politics is "context" as the political domination of China's state is unique to this geographical setting. The one-party state creates the ideal conditions for triggering the mechanism in question: it is not the mechanism per se. Without wishing to deny the value in identifying 'the features of contexts that allow different mechanisms to be activated so as to generate particular outcomes' (Jones, 2010: 209), the difficulty in distinguishing context from mechanism, as well as mechanism from process, demonstrates the want for more concrete and detailed examples of applied research using critical realism as a philosophical and methodological framework (Fletcher, 2016).

Context is an umbrella term in terms of both scale (ranging from the global to the body) and temporal aspects. While Yeung acknowledges the 'specification of mechanisms and their concrete contexts of operating efficacy matters much' (p.), the geographical limits that pertain to particular mechanisms – and how to identify them – lie beyond the scope of his article. Elsewhere, however, proponents of critical realism have engaged with the contingent properties of space and time and whether it is possible to construct universal and abstract theory whilst also acknowledging the particular elements of a phenomenon that 'vary hugely across space generating all manner of juxtapositions' (Cox, 2013: 54). More broadly, the concern to 'demarcate general process from local realizations, whilst also enabling the former to be augmented by the latter' is long-standing (Barnett, 1999: 280). It is twenty years since Clive Barnett questioned the role of context in human geography, asking whether understandings of borders and limits are taken for granted in theory and practice. Yeung (2003) subsequently reflected upon the methodological challenges presented by the contingent property of context and – contra to Barnett's (1999: 289) call for 'liberation from the normalising rules that usually govern context' – underlined the importance of appreciating the relevant broader settings of subjects/objects under empirical investigation.

There is, then, a history to Yeung's call to move from "surface" illustrations of some observed phenomena (neoliberalism, path dependence) and investigate in specific operating contexts the underlying mechanisms that have shaped the emergent powers or potentialities giving rise to that phenomena. Given this, one might detect an effort to stem certain types of scholarship that fail to take contextualised causal explanation seriously. Critical realism offers a radical alternative to positivism (where the goal is generalisable laws), interpretism (which seeks only to understand and interpret human behaviour) and postmodernism (which denies the existence of a universal stable reality) (Jones, 2010). I would contend that Yeung is troubled by the drift from cause (i.e. how to understand cause and effect) towards "difference" in geographical research on economies and is stating how he wishes to see the subdiscipline of "proper noun" economic geography' develop (Cockayne et al., 2018: 1511).¹ It would be unfair to suggest he is alone in staking a claim, but important to recognise the extent to which the article might be signalling a struggle over not just concepts but a broader geographical approach or project in view of the fact that the figureheads are for particular kinds of theory (critical realism in this instance) are increasingly located outside of geography departments, whether in business and management schools, the allied social sciences or within the realms of university management (James et al., 2018).

It might also be valuable to reflect upon the degree to which the drawing out of a particular concept (that is, mechanism) allows a claiming of authority given that the need for a more sophisticated theoretical articulation of the relationship between mechanism and process is not as clear cut as Yeung suggests. In short, and to return to the Brexit example briefly, do words matter if we need to understand why there was a small majority voted to leave the EU and the implications of this? They may matter if the goal of research is to write simple and citable theory, but less so if the ambition is to remove ignorance and false views, or to help improve economic fortunes as an extension of understanding uneven development and social inequality. Economic geography is often framed as an emancipatory social science (owing to its activist tradition and the manner in which this has been used to differentiate economic geography from economics). A framework of mechanism and process may help to raise and examine conventional ideas through measurement and causal modelling, but broadly defined geographies of economies informed by feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial and queer perspectives (which in many respects challenge orthodox critical realist views) also have a valuable role in illuminating the inherently spatial aspects of contemporary

¹ Not only does he start his article with a review of the debate in *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* over the future of UK economic geography, but his earlier (2003) methodological examination is directed towards practitioners of new economic geographies as opposed to what Cockayne et al (2018: 1512) term 'economic geography proper'.

inequality and injustice. Elsewhere scholars have argued for a continued collective interest in economic phenomena, whereby “things economic” are explored by scholars within and outwith economic geography proper (Cockayne et al., 2018). Critical realism can play a part in this by setting out an ordering framework for quantitative researchers to describe the statistical relationships within their data, and a theory of causation for qualitative research that takes account of the character of empirical findings (Crankshaw, 2014). Yet the questions posed and the problems that geographers seek collectively to address must be shaped by a diverse set of ideas and practices if they are to advance an emancipatory political agenda (Blomley, 2006).

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